**TO REJOICE TOGETHER AFTER A MORE SPECIAL MANNER**
**November 19, 2006**

**JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR**
**FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Psalm 65**
**Colossians 3:12–17**

**"Whatever you do, in word or deed,**
**do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,**
**giving thanks to God the Father through him."**
**Colossians 3:17 (NRSV)**

A child said *What is the grass?* Fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child?
I do not know what it is any more than he. . . .

I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrance designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners,
That we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Walt Whitman
*Song of Myself*

It is generally true that the stories and myths that give a people a sense of identity are not necessarily historically and factually accurate. And so at some point it became necessary to acknowledge that George Washington probably did not chop down a cherry tree and confess his guilt to his father, saying, "I cannot tell a lie." And he certainly did not throw a silver dollar across the Potomac. But there is one of our national myths that is true, factually and historically, and it is the story of the first Thanksgiving. I have loved this story since I first heard it—have loved the picture of Pilgrims in their gray and white clothing gathering around tables laden with food, and the Native Americans, all of it set against a perfect Currier & Ives backdrop of New England snow.

Most of it is true, and the more you learn about the story, the better it becomes. National Book Award-winning author Nathaniel Philbrick has written a wonderful new book, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War*, which is an extensively researched and well-written account of the remarkable saga of our Pilgrim mothers and fathers.

The voyage itself took sixty-five days. There were 102 Pilgrims and 2 dogs and 25 or so crew. Their possessions, such as they were, were in the hold. The 102 of them lived in between the deck and the hold, a crawl space not five feet high called the ’tween deck. They tried to provide privacy by constructing thin walls. They brought food, water, firewood, and beer—all of which was either gone or nearly gone before it was over. Two died during the voyage. Elizabeth Hopkins, one of three pregnant women on board, gave birth to a son.

They were an unusual group. Unlike those who made an earlier attempt at a settlement at Jamestown, they were not nobility or craftsmen or servants. They were families mostly, part of a congregation of English separatists who had settled in Leiden, Holland, in 1608, Puritans who wanted to reform the Church of England. These Puritans, Philbrick says, were “Puritan with a vengeance,” they withdrew altogether and wished only to be left alone to practice their religion according to their conscience. Holland afforded that freedom. But it was a different culture, and when the children started to be more Dutch than English, 102 of the congregation of 400 decided to establish a new colony in the New World. They had no illusions about the difficulty of the enterprise. At Jamestown in 1607, 70 of the first 109 settlers died during the first winter. The next year, 440 of 500 new colonists died of starvation and disease. By the time the Pilgrims set sail, 3,000 of the 3,600 English colonists at Jamestown had died.

They thought they were different. They fervently believed that God wanted them to do this and would provide for them. “We verily believe and trust the Lord is with us and will graciously prosper our endeavor.” “It is not with us as with other men whom small things can discourage,” they wrote. Their leader, William Bradford, said, “They knew they were pilgrims.”

They sailed from Leiden to Southampton, met up with the Mayflower with more people
on board, including William Bradford and Miles Standish, who was hired to handle military matters. They put in at Plymouth and on September 6, 1620, headed west across the Atlantic. They made an average of 2 miles per hour, encountered fierce storms, had to repair a broken mast. The deck leaked water constantly, the firewood ran out. When young John Howland climbed up on deck for some fresh air, he was blown overboard, grabbed a trailing halyard on the way down, was dragged behind ten feet below the surface, somehow was hauled in, lived to marry, and become the father of ten children.

November 9, 1620, they sighted land, explored the coast, and at that point did a most remarkable thing: wrote and signed the Mayflower Compact “to create a government based on civil consent rather than divine decree.” That was remarkable. They wouldn’t always live up to it. But they decided

against a theocracy, or divine right, or religious prerogative. Government in the new colony would derive from the consent of the governed and be carried out by elected officials.

At Providence harbor, a small landing party put ashore, sixteen well-armed men. They fell on their knees in gratitude, looked around, cut some cedar, and headed back to enjoy their first warm fire in a long time. It was Saturday, November 11. They stayed on board Sunday, to worship and pray. On Monday, they stepped ashore, and the first thing the women did was find a pond and wash their clothes. Philbrick says it's the reason Monday is wash day.

They explored for a month, finally settled on Plymouth, started building the first of nineteen small huts on December 23. Fifty-two of the 102 would die that winter.

They cleared and planted in the spring. Friendly natives showed them how. By September they had a crop of corn, squash, beans, peas, and barley (which meant they could have beer). The harbor was full of migrating birds, a good source of protein.

In early autumn, William Bradford wrote, "They gathered the fruits of their labors: it is time to rejoice together after a more special manner." He sent four men fowling, and they came back with enough geese and duck to feed everyone for a week. They planned a feast, perhaps remembering the harvest festivals of England. In addition to the vegetables, geese, and ducks, there was striped bass, bluefish, and cod. Their friend—at the moment at least—Massasoit arrived with 100 Pokanoket people, bringing five freshly killed deer.

There was no pumpkin pie and cranberry sauce, but there probably was wild turkey. There probably were no tables and there were no forks. They ate with their fingers and knives as they always did.

Philbrick writes: "The first Thanksgiving marked the conclusion of a remarkable year. Eleven months earlier the Pilgrims had arrived at the tip of Cape Cod, fearful and uninformed. They had spent the next months alienating and angering every Native American they had come across. By all rights none of the Pilgrims should have emerged from the first winter alive. . . . That it worked out differently was a testament to their grit, resolve, and faith."

"To rejoice together after a more special manner." Part of their gratitude was for nature's dependable fertility and bounty. And part of their gratitude was that they were alive and not dead— thanksgiving for the elemental, basic miracle of life.

The fertility, productivity, and bounty of the earth is a basic biblical theme. Many of the psalms are liturgical celebrations of the goodness of the world, its reliability, its capacity to feed and sustain us, its beauty to nurture our spirits, and, throughout, the way the creation itself reveals the love and bounty of the Creator. When you look at the world you see something of God.

> You establish mountains.
> You visit the earth and water it, provide grain.
> You crown the year with bounty.
> The pastures overflow, hills rejoice,
> meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
> valleys deck themselves with grain. (Psalm 65)

It is a picture of abundance, bounty.

God's creation is good, the Bible says on the first page. Very good. Later Christian theology would come to emphasize the fallenness of creation; the sinfulness of humanity; the susceptibility of the flesh, human needs, and appetites, to indulgence. By the fourth century of the Common Era, Christian theology had pretty much decided that God's creation wasn't all that good and that everybody needed to be delivered from it, from the body with its distressing needs and insistent appetites, to the realm of the spirit.

In fact, Roman Christianity under the influence of Augustine concluded that celibacy was a good idea. Christianity has been inclined to forget that creation—including the human body—is God's idea. C. S. Lewis quipped, "Material things are good. God invented them after all." And in a fine essay, "The Gift of Good Land," Wendell Berry writes, "The creator's love for the creation is mysterious. The wild ass and the wild lily are loved for their own sake and yet they are a part of a pattern that we must love because it includes us" (*The Art of the Commonplace,* p. 298).

The Bible begins with a celebration of the earth's beauty and bounty. And when theology has forgotten it the poets remind us.

> Gerard Manley Hopkins:
> "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."
>
> Walt Whitman:
> "What is the grass?
> I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
> A scented gift and remembrance designedly dropt,
> Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners,
> That we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*"

And Edna St. Vincent Millay:

> “O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
> Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
> Thy mists, that roll and rise!
> Thy woods, this autumn day. . . .
> . . . I do fear
> Thou’st made the world too beautiful this year/”

The Bible promises abundance. There is enough. There is food for all. Human beings, on the other hand, have never been able to trust that and notoriously operate on the threat of scarcity. Walter Brueggemann says, “We hardly notice our prosperity.” I thought about that as I watched the prescreening of a new National Geographic motion picture, *God Grew Weary of Us.* about the Lost Boys of Sudan. As a result of the terrible war that has been going on in Sudan between the Muslim north, the government, and the Christian Animist south, millions of people have been killed. A remarkable thing began to happen. Thousands of boys, ten to twelve years old down through infants, separated from parents—most of whom had been killed—began to walk all the way across Sudan, older boys taking care of the little ones. They walked 1,000 miles into Ethiopia, and when the Ethiopian government was overthrown, all the way back through Sudan, a second 1,000 mile march, to Kenya, where they are in U. N. refugee camps, more than 25,000 altogether. The United States agreed to accept and settle some of the Lost Boys of Sudan. A few are here in Chicago. You may have seen a newspaper article about them last week. From the starkest poverty, no running water, no electricity, constant starvation, and hunger, the boys were put on a plane, flown to New York and then to cities across the country, and placed immediately in their own apartments. They had never seen a refrigerator, running water, a toilet, packaged food, a light switch. The first trip to an American supermarket in Syracuse was surreal. I became uncomfortable watching as they walked wide-eyed in wonder and disbelief past mountains of fresh, gleaming vegetables, counters deep with meat, bread, canned goods, sweets, and at a bakery counter, a doughnut with sprinkles. It was beyond anything they could possibly have dreamt. And I thought about Brueggemann: “We hardly notice our prosperity.”

When we forget the promise of abundance and operate out of scarcity, we become greedy, stingy, and mean, Brueggemann says. We become afraid and try to secure our futures by getting all we can—getting everything. We keep the abundance for ourselves. We pay people not to grow food while people starve to death. We may read the Bible about the abundance of the earth, Walter says, but we keep our eye on the TV screen to see how the market is doing. We read the Bible some days but Nike ads everyday with

their promise that the one with the best sneakers wins ("The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," *Christian Century,* 24 March 1999).

In contrast the Bible makes a radical promise with economic and political implications: there is enough, and furthermore, when prosperity is shared, when loaves are broken and passed around, miracles happen. Abundance takes over. And so the Thanksgiving challenge is to try to trust the promise of God.

The Pilgrims were grateful, profoundly grateful that they were still alive. If we don't notice our prosperity, we probably don't notice that either. We're alive. Life has been given again today.

Stephen Mitchell introduces his translation of the Psalter with the observation that the psalms of praise are expressions of a "deep, exuberant gratitude for being here."

Langdon Gilkey, University of Chicago theologian, argued that human beings experience God in the "exultation of our own being: sensing, smelling, eating, loving . . . the sheer joy of existing." Every now and then, he said, we find ourselves thinking, "My God, it's good to be alive" (*Naming the Whirlwind*, p. 315).

Again the poets help us, by putting words to the gratitude we experience deepening with each succeeding year of life.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit priest-poet, near the end of his life writes, "Any day, any minute we bless God for our being, for anything, for food, for sunlight . . . things that give God glory" (See *Twenty Poems to Nourish Your Soul*, Judith Valente and Charles Reynard, p. 93).

No one ever wrote or said it more eloquently than the late Jane Kenyon, who died after a long battle with leukemia:

> I got out of bed
> on two strong legs.
> It might have been
> otherwise. I ate
> cereal, sweet
> milk, ripe, flawless
> peach. It might
> have been otherwise. . . .
>
> We ate dinner together
> at a table with silver
> candlesticks. . . .

I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know
it will be otherwise.
(*Otherwise: New and Selected Poems*, p. 214)

"Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus," St. Paul admonished the little community of Christians in the city of Colossae, "giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Every day is Thanksgiving. Gratitude to God—for the bounty of creation, for the gift of life—and for Jesus Christ, God's love given to us without condition, is at the heart of our faith every day of the year.

The late Robert McAfee Brown, one of the finest theologians and teachers of our generation, delivered an address once, "Theology as an Act of Gratitude." It is one of my very favorites:

> The distinctive word in the Christian vocabulary is "grace." . . . That God is gracious to us, that God loves us no matter how unlovable we may be. . . . God as revealed in Jesus Christ is a gracious God. . . .
>
> And if grace is the distinctive word to describe God's attitudes toward us, there is also a word that describes the response we are called to make. That word is "gratitude." (*The Pseudonyms of God*, p. 13)

I was struck by the title of the new Dixie Chicks movie, *Shut Up and Sing.* It reminded me of something my mother said once. When I was taken, as a child, to the annual community Thanksgiving service, which I always found to be dreary and boring, and complained and suggested that we really didn't have to go and maybe I could just stay home, I was told, firmly—in that day when children did not have many choices nor were their opinions particularly welcomed—"That'll do. You're going to church."

"Why? It's boring," I tried again.

"We're going because of the hymns," Mother said. "They're the best in the book."

She didn't say it, but the message was a good one: "Shut up and sing!"

Robert McAfee Brown said in that speech that there is one hymn that perfectly gathers up the theology of grace and gratitude. A hymn, he said,

“appropriate for every occasion: at the end of every sermon, at a baptism, a wedding, a hymn par excellence for Communion. It is appropriate to sing before or after a meal, and was in fact originally written to be sung as a table grace. It is the hymn,” Brown said, “that I fervently hope will be sung at my funeral:”

> Now thank we all our God
> With heart and hands and voices,
> Who wondrous things hath done,
> In whom this world rejoices;
> Who, from our mothers’ arms,
> Hath blessed us on our way
> With countless gifts of love,
> And still is ours today.

Amen.